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ABSTRACT

This study examined preservice teachers' responses to a survey that assessed their tolerance of difference in race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual preference. It also investigated their perspectives concerning welfare recipients and non-English speaking people. During the fall 1998 semester, 117 preservice teachers enrolled in the required two-semester Development and Diversity classes at the University of Mississippi completed a 21-item instrument that measured tolerance of differences. The instrument was administered prior to instruction at the beginning of the semester. Data analysis indicated that overall, respondents were consistently accepting of ethnic, racial, and gender differences; children with behavior disorders; and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. They were inconsistent in their acceptance of people with disabilities, issues related to the welfare system, issues related to declaring English as the United States' primary language, admission of non-English speaking immigrants to the United States, religious differences, and sexual preference differences. (SM)

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An Assessment of Preservice Teachers'

Tolerance of Diversity

As the new millennium approaches, student populations throughout the United States become more and more diverse. Our country is not just a melting pot; it could be described as a "salad bowl". Classrooms and schools are diverse. It is no longer sufficient for teachers to simply plan a lesson for content mastery for a particular type of learner; teachers must now prepare to meet the needs of every learner. Teachers today are faced with differences in gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disabilities, religious affiliation and sexual preference. It is crucial that preservice teachers are prepared with knowledge, skills, and resources to meet the needs of each diverse learner. This preparation must begin in teacher education programs. Many preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with preconceived ideas, values, and beliefs about diversity. It is imperative that teacher education programs attempt to increase awareness and tolerance of the differences within the classroom.

Colville-Hall et al. (1995) noted that teacher educators in the 1990s face many challenges in preparing preservice teachers to work in schools responsive to social and economic shifts. But even as the student body has grown more heterogeneous, white women continue to dominate the teaching profession. Nearly three out of every four public school teachers are female, and 89 percent are white, whereas only 7 percent are black and 2 percent are Hispanic (Latham, 1999). A great challenge to delivering instruction in diversity to learners results from the enrollment of predominantly white preservice teachers with limited, if any, experience with other cultural groups or

culturally different settings (Colville-Hall et al. 1995). Signs of apprehension, uncertainty, and a semblance of intolerance to diversity issues in the classroom may result from a lack of adequate preparation of teachers in the area of awareness toward diversity in preservice training (Irwin, 1997). Teacher educators must confront the entry attitudes and beliefs of prospective teachers, determine program strategies that can reshape their attitudes and beliefs, and seek better understanding of what preservice teachers must know to become effective teachers of culturally diverse student populations (Jordan, 1995). A teacher's initial encounter with issues of cultural diversity and cultural diverse children should not be in the classroom with pupils, but during the college preservice teacher preparation (Irwin, 1997). The national standards movement provides teachers educators with a vision and a challenge that could strengthen their efforts to prepare teachers for cultural diversity (Bennett, 1995).

The professional literature, as well as current wisdom, clearly indicates the importance of both respecting and celebrating, rather than merely tolerating, the differences among us. Both teacher educators and preservice teachers, as well as teachers and people in general, should be able to successfully interact with all students within our classrooms; something that can be accomplished only if one is aware of one's own biases, prejudices, and/or predispositions.

This study examined preservice teachers' responses to items that assessed respondents' tolerance of differences in race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and sexual preference. It also probed respondents' perspectives concerning welfare recipients and non-English speaking individuals.

During the 1998 fall semester, 117 preservice teachers who were enrolled in the

required two-semester Development and Diversity classes at the University of Mississippi completed a 21-item instrument that measured tolerance of differences of various groups. The instrument was administered prior to instruction at the beginning of the semester. Student participation was voluntary and anonymous and results were tabulated and interpreted for the entire group without reference to gender, race, or age. Findings for the 21 items are reported on the attached scale both as numbers and percentages.

There was a 100% response rate for items 4, 5, 6, and 21. These items pertained to people with disabilities, religious tolerance, the importance of speaking a language other than English, and socioeconomic status, respectively. There was a 99% response rate for items 2, 3, 8, 11, 16, 17, and 18. These items pertained to sexual preference, gender, admission of non-English speaking immigrants to the United States, the Bible, the English language, and race. There was a 98% response rate for items 1, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, and 20. These items pertained to ethnicity and race, welfare, gender, sexual preference, religion, and gender. There was a 97% response rate, the lowest, for items 12, 13, and 19. These items pertained to race, people with disabilities, and children with behavior disorders, respectively.

On Item #1, "I prefer to socialize with people of my ethnicity or race rather than with individuals from different ethnicities or races," 45% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree indicating that respondents are accepting of socializing with people of a different ethnicity or race. These results are consistent with the results for items #12 and 17, both of which pertained to race. On item #12, "If I had a choice, I would rather work for a supervisor of my own race," 57% of the respondents disagree

and only 20% chose agree or strongly agree. On item #17, "People from certain racial groups are prone to violence," 60% of the respondents disagreed and less than 2% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree.

Responses to the three items that pertained to gender, items #3, 9, and 20 were also consistent and reflected no significant gender biases. On item #3, "It is better for women than for men to stay at home and care for the children," only 33% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree, although an additional 29% of the respondents chose partially agree. For item #9, "I would rather work for a male than for a female supervisor," only 21% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree, although here too an additional 20% of the respondents chose partially agree. For item #20, "men make better scientists than women because men think logically," 87% of the respondents disagree; a reflection perhaps of a lack of gender bias and/or an unfamiliarity with emerging brain research on gender-performance differences.

Responses to items #19 and 21 reflected a lack of bias concerning children with behavior disorders and people from low socioeconomic groups. On item #19, "Children with behavior disorders should not be taught in general education classrooms," only 8% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree. On item #21, "People from low socioeconomic groups do not value education," 85% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree and less than two percent chose agree or strongly agree.

Results were inconsistent concerning respondents' perspectives on people with disabilities as probed by items #4 and 13. On item #4, "Our society is catering too much to people with disabilities," 91% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree. However, on item #13, "Children with disabilities learn more when educated

in special classes," 41% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and only 33% selected strongly disagree or disagree.

Results were somewhat inconsistent concerning respondents' perspectives on sexual preference as probed by items #2, 10 and 18, although results of these three items suggest that many respondents had an intolerant and somewhat punitive view of gay people/couples. On item #2, "I feel uncomfortable around gay couples," 51% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and an additional 22% of the respondents selected partially agree. On item #10, "AIDS is a penalty gay people must pay because of their lifestyle," 69% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree, although an additional 18% chose agree or strongly agree and an additional 12% chose partially agree. On item #18, "I would not want my child to be taught by a gay teacher," 40% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree, an additional 25% of the respondents chose partially agree, and only 12% of the respondents strongly disagreed.

Results were inconsistent concerning respondents' perspectives on religious differences as probed by items #5, 11, and 14. On item #5, "Non-Christian religions are incompatible with American values and traditions," 51% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree reflecting acceptance of non-Christian religions. On item #11, "Without belief in the Bible, people cannot lead moral lives," 47% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree, reflecting that a moral life does not have to be Bible-driven, although an additional 36% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and an additional 17% of the respondents partially agreed. On item #14, "This country was founded on Christian values; therefore, Christian prayer should be allowed in public schools," 57% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and

an additional 20% of the respondents partially agreed; a possible reflection of either "Bible-belt" mentality and/or disregard or unawareness of current interpretations of separation of church and state.

Results were inconsistent concerning respondents' perspectives about welfare as probed by items #7 and 15. On item #7, "Most people on welfare can work if they want to," 55% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree, an additional 36% of the respondents partially agreed, and less than 2% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree reflecting the disturbing stereotype of the lazy welfare recipient. Yet on item #15, "The welfare system should be eliminated and people should be forced to work," only 15% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree, although an additional 43% of the respondents partially agreed.

Results were inconsistent concerning respondents' perspectives about the English language as probed by items #6 and 16, and about non-English speaking immigrants as probed by item #8. On item #6, "In the United States speaking a language other than English is not important," 72% of the respondents chose strongly disagree or disagree reflecting an acceptance of the importance of speaking a language other than English in the United States. On item #16, "English should be officially declared the primary language of the United States," 66% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and an additional 21% of the respondents partially agreed reflecting respondents' preference for English to be officially declared the primary language of the United States. On a tangentially and only somewhat related item, item #8, "Limits should be placed for admitting non-English speaking immigrants to the United States," 32% of the respondents chose agree or strongly agree and an

additional 32% of the respondents partially agreed.

Respondents in the limited-sample study were consistently accepting of ethnic, racial, gender differences, children with behavior disorders, and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Respondents were inconsistent in their acceptance of people with disabilities, issues related to the welfare system, issues related to declaring English as the United States' primary language, admission of non-English speaking immigrants to the United States, religious differences, and sexual preference differences. If the results of this study are credible and at all generalizable to preservice teachers of both sexes nationwide, then more/better education of preservice teachers about diversity is necessary.

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Instrument Results

NOTE: Percentages are rounded. N = 117

1. I prefer to socialize with people of my ethnicity or race rather than with individuals from different ethnicities or races. (98% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.16	.29	.30	.20	.05

2. I feel uncomfortable around gay couples. (99% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.07	.20	.22	.17	.34

3. It is better for women than for men to stay at home and care for children. (99% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.13	.24	.29	.25	.08

4. Our society is catering too much to people with disabilities. (100% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.48	.43	.03	.04	.02

5. Non-Christian religions are incompatible with American values and traditions. (100% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.15	.36	.25	.12	.13

6. In the United States speaking a language other than English is not important. (100% Response Rate)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.27	.45	.17	.07	.02

7. Most people on welfare can work if they want to do so. (98% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<.01	.01	.36	.27	.28

8. Limits should be placed for admitting non-English-speaking immigrants to the United States. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.02	.23	.32	.19	.13

9. I would rather work for a male than for a female supervisor. (98% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.21	.37	.20	.11	.10

10. AIDS is a penalty gay people must pay because of their lifestyle. (98% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.43	.26	.12	.08	.10

11. Without belief in the Bible, people cannot lead moral lives. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.29	.28	.17	.19	.17

12. If I had the choice, I would rather work for a supervisor of my own race. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.17	.40	.22	.11	.09

13. Children with disabilities learn more when educated in special classes. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.15	.18	.25	.27	.14

14. This country was founded on Christian values; therefore, Christian prayer should be allowed in public schools.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.08	.15	.20	.24	.33

15. The welfare system should be eliminated and people should be forced to work. (98% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.08	.34	.43	.08	.07

16. English should be officially declared the primary language of the United States. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<.01	.11	.21	.25	.41

17. People from certain racial groups are prone to violence. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.26	.34	.27	.13	<.01

18. I would not want my child to be taught by a gay teacher. (99% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.12	.23	.25	.20	.20

19. Children with behavior disorders should not be taught in general education classrooms. (97% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.16	.38	.37	.05	.03

20. Men make better scientists than women because men think logically. (98% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.16	.29	.30	.20	.05

21. People from low socioeconomic groups do not value education. (100% Response Rate.)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Partially Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
.16	.29	.30	.20	.05